

Prepared Statement by
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A VETERAN OF SERVICE IN WORLD WAR II
IN THE UNITED STATES MERCHANT MARINE

For the 110th CONGRESS, Year 2007
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS
Full Committee Hearing on H.R. 23
April 18, 2007, 10:00 a.m.
334 Cannon

On May 27, 1941, well before the attack on Pearl Harbor that brought this nation officially into World War II as an active combatant, the President, with the approval of Congress, declared an “UNLIMITED NATIONAL EMERGENCY”, effectively putting this nation on a “WAR” basis. On April 19, 1942 – 65 years ago, tomorrow – the President, again with the approval of Congress, took “complete and absolute” control of this nation’s Maritime Industry, its ships, shipyards, docks and – most importantly – its seamen. Under these orders, the mariners already employed on American “Merchant Ships” became part of the “armed forces of this nation” under longstanding International Law.

The control of our ships was turned over to the United States Navy, with guns and gunners, provided by the Navy, placed on our ships. The Merchant Seamen were ordered by our President and the Congress to take an active part in the defense of our ships.

Under orders authorized by the President, those ships were repainted to hide their identities as Merchant Ships and were then identifiable as U.S. Navy warships. These ships and their crews, along with the thousands of ships being built by our government, and the new crews recruited, trained and assigned to these ships by U.S. government

agencies to carry wartime cargoes, performed honorably, and with distinction, in support of this nation and other Allied nations in that war.

Many American Merchant Mariners sailed the ships that delivered the war cargoes to our friends and Allies. Some served under “flags of convenience”; many, secretly, under flags of ships chartered to our Navy and Army to hide from the public our nation’s involvement in the war at that early time. Most of these seamen have since died, in some cases leaving their dependents destitute.

Soon came the assault on our ships and the slaughter of our seamen, known to the Nazi German Navy as the beginning of “the Happy Time” when wholesale sinking of our ships began. Not all of those brave young men survived to continue sailing after Pearl Harbor, but their widows, children and other next of kin deserved – and deserve – recognition and compensation as much as anyone who came later to the defense of our nation. Belatedly, this bill offers some recognition and some compensation to a limited number of surviving merchant seamen and their widows.

In 1943, I was an 18-year old Cadet Midshipman in the United States Maritime Service. As part of my “training”, I took part in three invasions, in Italy, Sardinia and France, as well as several ocean crossings exposed to enemy attack by U-boats, enemy aircraft and armed raiders.

In 1945, when the war was winding down, we were told that we would still be needed to bring home the troops, resettle millions of displaced people and deliver necessities to our allies. We were not told that our government was giving away our rights to come home, continue our education or compete on a level playing field for our jobs or our places in society. Not until 1988 (pursuant to a federal court order) would we

be recognized as “veterans”. Hence we received none of the significant benefits bestowed upon military veterans at the war’s end.

Our lengthy and dangerous service was not recognized by many local draft boards. Instead, we were threatened with being drafted into the Army for an indeterminate tour of occupation duty if we went home before being released officially. In my case, after more than three years of active wartime service in the Merchant Marine, I returned home to either attend college or find a job, but without the benefits of the GI Bill enjoyed by the other services. After finally being accepted to a college (though without GI education benefits), I had to forfeit that opportunity when, one week before classes started, my draft board threatened me with imprisonment if I did not report for either military or merchant marine duty. I returned to sea. Many other merchant marine veterans were similarly treated.

During the war, Congress authorized substantial expenditures for Public Relations for our military services, but not for the Merchant Marine. Some of our Naval and military leadership refused to acknowledge that we even took part in the war!

Some truth finally did come out – years after the end of the war – that we, the merchant mariners, had suffered a far higher rate of casualties than did our military services: more than one in 25, compared to one in 32 for the Marine Corps, twice as high as the Army, three times that of the Navy, four times higher than the U.S. Army Air Corps. In all, some ten thousand merchant mariners were killed, and many more wounded.

The number of ships lost was also staggering.

- In February 1942, 71 merchant ships sunk in the Atlantic; 65 of them were sunk in American waters.

- We lost another 65 ships in March 1942, and 65 more in April when the first U-boat was sunk.
- In December 1942, we lost yet another 61 ships including 19 sailing in convoy.
- In March 1943, there were 105 sinkings, 72 in convoys.
- In July 1943, for the first time, Allied construction of Merchant Ships exceeded sinkings.

In all, over a thousand United States merchant ships were lost.

Was our contribution to the war effort effective? The people at home supported the war effort with their labor. We, the merchant mariners, brought home the raw materials they needed to build the tools for our military services to fight with. WE brought home the iron, aluminum, rubber, chemicals, and other materials from which trucks, tanks, aircraft, guns, bullets and bombs were made. WE delivered the finished goods to wherever our military leaders said they needed them. In fact, we delivered many times more weapons and military equipment than the enemy had.

For comparison:

	The enemy had:	We delivered:
Tanks	52,000	227,000
Artillery	180,000	915,000
Mortars	73,000	658,000
Machine Guns	674,000	4,744,000
Trucks	595,000	3,060,000
Aircraft (combat)	146,000	417,000
Aircraft (training)	28,000	103,000
Aircraft (transport)	4,900	43,000

Yet despite all of our accomplishments, our losses and our sacrifices, and despite some recognition by Congress, it still took orders from a Federal Judge (Oberdorfer), to get from our military leaders (Department of Defense) even partial, reluctant recognition of our services – and that not until 1988!

Under this Bill, the earliest merchant mariner service date for the proposed benefit is December 7, 1941, even though both Congress and the President recognized earlier dates for our service. Public Law 87, passed by the 78th Congress in 1942, set May 1, 1940 as the earliest date for the Certificate of Substantially Continuous Service needed for these benefits. Our government has also awarded service ribbons to merchant mariners who served between September 9, 1939 and December 7, 1941 (medals added later), such as the Conspicuous Service Medal, the Distinguished Ship Award, and the Mariners Medal.

In fairness to those merchant mariners who served prior to December 7, 1941, they and their survivors should also be recognized and compensated.

On signing the “G.I. Bill of Rights” at the end of World War II, President Roosevelt regretted that the Merchant Mariners who had served so valiantly were not included, and he asked Congress to “correct that oversight” and welcome us home.

I am now 82 years old (or young), and I – along with the remnant of other merchant mariner veterans who yet survive – am still waiting, more than sixty years later, for this nation to welcome us home. This Bill provides modest compensation and long-awaited recognition.

Respectfully submitted,

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